



Illinois After the Civil War and the Great Chicago Fire

Illinois After the War

Glossary

Reconstruction Period

– to reconstruct
means to rebuild –
Reconstruction Pe-
riod means a time of
rebuilding

General Lee surren-
ders to General Grant,
April 9, 1865. Courtesy
National Park Service.

The Civil War officially ended on April 9, 1865, with the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee to Union General Ulysses S. Grant. Peace had come, but the country had been weakened in many ways by the four-year war. Political, social, and cultural issues still deeply divided the North and the South. Many questions had to be answered about reuniting the country, rebuilding damaged homes, businesses, and farms, and determining the role of the freed slaves. Historians call the time following the Civil War the *Reconstruction Period* (1865-1877).

The government of the *re*-United States of America had a difficult task to mend the deep wounds to the country. It took many years to do this, but it did not slow the growth of the country. After the war, America once again focused on moving its boundaries

westward. This westward movement made Illinois the departure point for the thousands of settlers looking for new homes. As the country grew, Illinois became the center of the nation rather than its western frontier.

The end of the Civil War did not solve all of the problems of slavery. What happened in Illinois is a good example of what happened in other places in the country. Even though Illinois was the first state to ratify the



discrimination — treating individual people badly because of a decision that *all* people in that group have some bad quality or characteristic

treaty, treaties — an legal agreement between groups of people or governments

Illini Confederation — The Illini Confederation consisted of the Cahokia, Michigamea, Kaskaskia, Peoria, and Tamaroa tribes. A confederation is composed of groups of people who share a common culture, language, or purpose and work together for the good of the larger group.

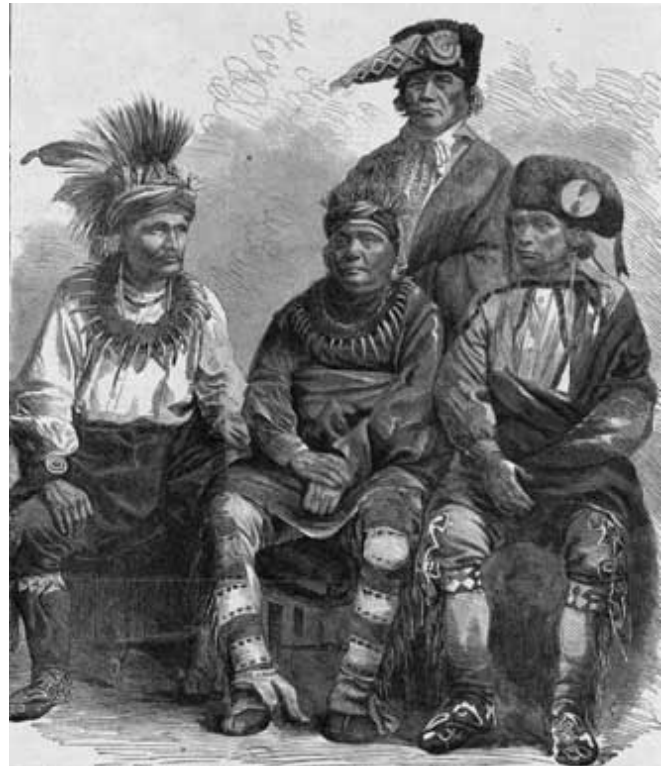
Injustice, injustices — unfairness; injury

Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed slavery, **discrimination** was so ingrained that a black person had a very difficult time getting a job, finding a home, and supporting a family. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave black men over 21 years of age the right to vote, but in many places in Illinois local laws and fear kept black men from voting. The slaves were free, but even in Illinois, the home of Abraham Lincoln, they did not have equal rights with white citizens.

Problems for Native American people increased after the Civil War as pioneers moved west and settled on their homelands. Much blood was shed because white settlers and the United States government failed to honor the rights of the native people and uphold **treaties**. By the end of the 1830s, the Miami, Peoria, Kickapoo, and other Illinois tribes had relocated farther north, south, and west. As settlers began moving west after the war, they again came into conflict with

peoples of the **Illini Confederation**, eventually pushing many of the native tribes into Oklahoma where the Peoria and Miami remain today. The struggle between the native people, settlers, and the federal army was violent and led to great **injustices** to the Indians.

Chicago, as well as the rest of Illinois, was a major supplier of goods to the settlers moving west. The city had developed as a major manufacturing and railroad center during the Civil War because the Mississippi River had been closed to trade by the war.



Delegation of Iowa's, Sacs and Foxes from Nebraska to Washington: Tar-a-kee, Pe-ti-o-ki-ma, Lag-er-lash, Too-hi, Date: 1866 Creator A. Gardner. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University, <<http://Lincoln.lib.niu.edu>>.

livestock — farm animals such as cattle or pigs

produce — agricultural products such as fruits and vegetables

transportation hub — a location where many routes meet

immigrant, immigrants — a person who comes to a country to live permanently

agribusiness — any business or industry that has to do with farming; examples: manufacturing or selling farm equipment; buying and selling grain

meat packing plant — a business for buying, butchering, and selling meat product particularly from cattle and hogs

stockyard — a place for keeping cattle, sheep, etc. temporarily while waiting to slaughter, sell, or ship them

Chicago's ability to manufacture supplies for the Union army fueled the city's growth during the war. Almost all of the manufacturers stayed in Illinois after the war ended, enabling Chicago to supply settlers in the same way it had supplied the Union army. **Livestock** and **produce** from the new western farms and ranches came to Chicago to be sent on to the eastern part of the United States. By the late 1860s, trains streamed into Chicago from all directions, while others departed to nationwide destinations. Chicago had become one of America's most important **transportation hubs**. Illinois' location made it the logical center for sending and receiving agricultural goods, manufactured items, and people for the entire country.

Thousands of European **immigrants** came to fill the new manufacturing and **agricultural** jobs in Illinois. Many of these new Americans picked Illinois as their final stop on their journeys from Poland, Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. It was fairly easy for new arrivals to reach the state by train or by boat. Travelers could follow the Great Lakes route, travel up the Mississippi, or ride the train to Illinois. By 1865, half the population of Chicago was foreign born. Illinois was attractive to the immigrants because it was a perfect location to settle and to be successful. Illinois had rich soil, a good climate for growing crops, coal to feed the steam engines of ships and trains, and many rivers to connect the state to other parts of the country. Even before the railroads were built, Illinois was connected to the east coast by way of the Great Lakes and to the Gulf of Mexico by the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. Canals, such as the Erie and Illinois & Michigan, connected the rivers and lakes to each other, completing the water transportation system. Location, natural resources, and transportation all contributed to the creation of jobs.

New towns were built along the transportation routes, and towns that were already in key locations grew and changed. For example, in 1865 the Union Stockyards **meatpacking plant** was built in Chicago. Now the city had an enormous **stockyard** to house and process animals. Before 1865, there were many stockyards operating throughout the city. The noise and smell from these animals, the **stench** from butchering them, and the flies that followed made parts of the city disgusting and unhealthy places to work or live. The new stockyard meant that animals were being processed in just one location and that the processed meat was shipped in newly invented ice-refrigerated railcars to cities and towns across America. Chicago's location benefited the

stench — stink; really bad smell

bumper crop, bumper crops — unusually large crop

surplus — more than is needed or can be used at the time

monopoly — complete and total control of a business, service, or product

grange — an old word for farm

patron, patrons — a special guardian or protector



“The Grange Awakening the Sleepers”
Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Digitization, Project Northern Illinois University,
<<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>>.

meatpacking industry and the industry, in turn, helped the city grow into second largest city in the country.



Union Stockyards. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Troubled Times for Illinois Agriculture

Illinois farms were producing **bumper crops** after the Civil War, but farmers were in trouble. They were producing more food by using better and better methods and equipment and making less money. Supplying food for the Union Army had created a need for more grain (the demand raised prices), but when the war ended in 1865, the demand dropped, creating a **surplus** and lowering the price. Competition from the settlers farther west hurt Illinois farmers, too. These new farmers were shipping their grain to Chicago, adding to the food surplus and driving prices down even more. In addition, the powerful railroad companies kept raising the price for Illinois farmers to ship their grain to market. This angered farmers, who were forced to pay a price they thought was unfair. Because railroads had a **monopoly**, most farmers had no other way to get their products to distant markets.

The farmers decided to fight back by organizing into groups to market and transport their products at a fair price. The largest of these organizations was called the *National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry*. The local groups were called granges and the members were called grangers. The first grange in Illinois started in 1867. The grange members planned to compete against the railroads and merchants who treated them unfairly by working cooperatively. They built their own stores, grain elevators, and mills and kept marketing costs low in order to help each other. Eventually their cooperation led to the farmers providing support to political candidates who supported the grange on issues that affected

agriculture. Farmers remained a powerful group of voters in Illinois and in the nation for a long time.

The Great Chicago Fire

Shortly after the Civil War, a major disaster took place in Illinois. In 1871, Chicago was only 38 years old, but it had experienced incredibly fast growth. With a population of over 330,000, Chicago was larger than its nearest rival, St. Louis. Much of the city had been built quickly with wooden structures. Grain elevators, warehouses, hundreds of ships, and 13 miles of wooden docks and piers lined the Chicago River. A severe drought gripped Chicago during the summer of 1871. Fear of a major fire had the people in the city on edge. That fear came true during two days in October when a huge, uncontrollable fire swept panic, death, and destruction through the fifth-largest city in America.

Besides the tinder-dry conditions, many other fire-safety problems existed in Chicago. Many structures were not built according to safety codes. Narrow streets and closely packed buildings increased the danger of fire; once a fire started it would be hard to reach and could spread rapidly. The narrow streets also meant that it would be hard to evacuate people from the city if there was a fire. The city had been urged to purchase a fireboat that could spray water from the Chicago River on the docks and warehouse if they caught fire. Unfortunately, none of the problems had been addressed.

The Chicago Fire Department was very busy during the first week of October in 1871. On October 7 what came to be known as the “Saturday Night Fire” started and destroyed four square blocks of businesses and houses. The fire nearly got out of control, but was finally extinguished by courageous fire fighters. When the blaze ended on Sunday at 3:00 p.m. the firefighters were exhausted, some were injured, and the fire-fighting equipment was damaged.

Half of the city’s population lived on the west side where a new method in home building called *balloon* framing was being used. This method used pre-cut lumber and nails—materials that cost less than brick or stone and required fewer laborers in the construction, making houses more affordable. Many families lived in small houses—usually with a separate barn or shed for livestock—that were built on narrow lots, and separated from their neighbors by wood fences. Built among these west-side cottages

husbandry —
farming, agriculture

dock, docks — a
platform built along a
waterway used for
unloading boats and
ships; wharf; pier

pier, piers — a
platform built along a
waterway used for
unloading boats and
ships; wharf; dock

drought — a long
period of dryness
that cause damage
to crops; a long time
without precipitaion
(rain, snow, etc.)

tinder — something
very dry used to start
a fire; kindling

cottage, cottages —
a small frame house

were various factories and mills. People in the neighborhoods used wood shavings from the mills for their cookstoves, and many were already stocking up on firewood for the coming winter. Dry wood was everywhere.

The weather on Sunday, October 8, was hot, with a strong wind blowing from the southwest. The O’Leary family, one of the thousands of Irish immigrant families in Chicago, lived on DeKoven Street on the city’s west side. They had a small milk business and kept five cows and a calf in a barn at the rear of their lot. No one knows exactly how the fire started, but legend has placed the blame on a cow kicking over a lantern in the O’Leary’s barn. Drought conditions, a strong wind, and a wooden city were the ingredients that came together sometime around nine o’clock that evening to create *The Great Chicago Fire*.

Devastation in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.



When the blaze was discovered, firefighters who were already exhausted from fighting the large fire the day before, were first sent to the wrong place. The fire quickly spread east and north. Everything in the path of the fire from the smallest houses and shops to the largest business buildings and mansions was destroyed. After two days, rain fell and by the morning of October 10, the fire died out, leaving the heart of the city in ashes. For 36 hours the fire had raged, burning an area 3 1/2 square miles, destroying 18,000 structures, leaving at least 300 dead, uncounted injured, and 100,000 homeless. The devastation was astonishing. Almost as astonishing was the spirit of the people who rebuilt most of the city in only one year. The new Chicago looked very different. Some of the rubble from the fire was actually pushed into Lake Michigan to make new land for construction. The city soon regained the title “Queen of the West” and by 1893 was ready to host the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by holding the Chicago World’s Fair (**World’s Columbian Exposition**).

World’s Columbian Exposition — the celebration of Columbus’ discovery of America

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